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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: INDIA PREMIER LEAGUE CRICKET  
SEASON MOVED ABROAD

11. (SBU) Summary. Next month's Indian Premier League (IPL) cricket tournament will be held in South Africa after the league's organizers failed to secure Government of India approval for the matches to go ahead in India. The tournament - scheduled to begin on April 10 - clashes with the upcoming Indian Lok Sabha (lower house of parliament) general election, raising doubts that the states and venues would be able to provide security for both events. News of the cancellation has stunned cricket-mad India, and has dominated news coverage in a way that few stories in India can. The move has quickly become a campaign issue, as many in the opposition are beginning to cite it as yet another example of the current government's inability to provide security or combat terrorism. End Summary.

12. (U) After three weeks of uncertainty surrounding the future of the IPL, the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) announced on March 24 that the second season of the Indian Premier League will be held in South Africa. The IPL, the first professional cricket league in India, was an overwhelming success in its first season last year. The tournament was the most highly watched sporting event in Indian television history. Cricket has a near religious following in India, far surpassing the passion invoked by baseball, football, basketball or hockey in the United States. It is nearly impossible to walk the streets of New Delhi or any other Indian city or village and not see a game in progress. The star players are national heroes and often make their way into prominent political positions. The loss of the season will be major blow for team owners, sponsors and cricket fans across the country.

13. (U) The fate of the league had been up in the air ever since the March 3 attacks on the Sri Lankan cricket team in Lahore. The day before the attacks, the Election Commission had announced the upcoming schedule for the 2009 general Lok Sabha election. The Home Ministry quickly claimed that it would be difficult to provide security for all of the 59 IPL games while also securing the national polls, a massive operation involving over 700 million voters and over 800,000 polling booths. In the days following the attack, Home Minister P. Chidambaram announced that he had directed his officials to begin discussions with the IPL on adjustment of schedules, as national security forces would not be available to provide security for the games and elections simultaneously. He later said that all security would have to come from local forces.

14. (U) After a review, few state governments were willing to take on the security responsibilities given election demands.

On March 10, in one last effort to save the season, IPL Commissioner Lalit Modi submitted a fresh schedule with games scheduled to fit around the election. Modi's proposals were rejected within a week by the Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi and Rajasthan state governments which publicly declared that they would not guarantee security.

15. (U) (U) The BCCI and the IPL then huddled quickly with the franchise owners to discuss the options. Given the financial success of last year's tournament, talk about canceling this year's season quickly died down. The IPL announced on March 23 that the games would go on, but would move to venues in another country. Speculation was rife that the tournament would be moved to England. But Mr. Modi opted instead for South Africa following talks with Cricket South Africa, ultimately because of the favorable weather conditions. The IPL assured the Indian public that the timing of the games would be adjusted so they are televised in prime time in India.

16. (SBU) Commentators were quick to point out that the states that declined to provide security -- Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Delhi and Rajasthan -- are all Congress Party-ruled states. Assessment of many analysts is that the Congress Party directed its Chief Ministers to pull the plug on the tournament because was viewed as a net positive for the BJP, given the close BJP connections of some key IPL organizers.

17. (SBU) Comment: The inability of the UPA government and its affiliate Congress Party-run states to provide security for the games is quickly becoming an important part of the

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BJP election campaign. The firebrand Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi (unrelated to Lalit Modi) has sardonically offered to host all of the games in Gujarat. He called the decision to move the league "a stain on the face of the country" and suggested that "it will give the wrong signals to the world." This incident is already raising doubts about India hosting the Commonwealth Games Delhi in 2010.

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